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‘Not Bad for a Few Ordinary Girls in a Tin Hut’ - Re-Imagining Women’s Social Experience of the Second World War Through Female Ensemble Drama.

Women’s history and women’s television, referring to television made with a discernibly female focus and targeted at a presumed female audience, can both be said to be marginalised within the wider context of their respective fields. The necessity of the ‘women’s’ prefix imbues them with an otherness which segregates them from mainstream or traditional narratives - both in history and on television. In her 2013 article, Vicky Ball makes a convincing case for female ensemble drama as a space in which women’s screen histories as well as women’s history on screen can be re-examined in a female-centred context. This article examines two female ensemble dramas; *Land Girls*, created by Roland Moore and first distributed by the BBC in 2009, and *The Bletchley Circle*, written by Guy Burt and first distributed by ITV in September 2012. Both dramas are located within prime time schedules and pitched towards a presumed, largely female audience, accustomed to consuming conventionally structured popular history dramas. The article seeks to explore the ways in which these two Second World War dramas offer at once a progressive, centre stage space in which women and their experiences of the Second World War can be explored, whilst at the same time, culminating in resolutions which re-situate women within more conventionally conservative roles, reasserting implicitly conservative gender norms.

The BBC’s *Land Girls* follows a group of women recruited to work as members of the Women’s Land Army (WLA) to supplement agricultural labour on Pasture Farm, part of the fictitious Hoxley Manor Estate.¹ The characters in the BBC series represent a cross section of typical recruits; young women away from home for the first time, living and working with other

¹ Commonly referred to as “land girls”, members of the WLA were billeted on farms or in hostels around the country as required to supplement male farm labourers lost to the armed forces. Often with little to no prior experience or training, the land girls performed a huge variety of tasks on the farms, most of which were highly physically demanding and sometimes dangerous.

women from different classes and backgrounds and the series derives its narrative from the girls' attempts to adjust to their new surroundings, new jobs and to each other.

The second series this article will examine is ITV drama *The Bletchley Circle*. Set 7 years after the end of the Second World War, it features four former code breakers at the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park. The four women apply their analytical and deductive skills to identify codes and patterns in the behaviour of a serial killer. As well as functioning as a standard murder mystery narrative, in which a group of investigators combine their individual skills to tackle previously unsolvable crimes, *The Betchley Circle* also explores the post-war experience of many women forced to return to the home after war time service. The series explores the women's attempts to reconcile their changed identities and wartime experiences with a post-war society seeking to erase both

These two dramas can be seen to offer a simultaneously progressive, yet clearly delineated space for telling women's history. In terms of wartime narratives, the removal of men to active service serves as a 'narrative device to produce central female protagonists to whom things can happen.'² In their removal from men the women in these two dramas are rendered available as heroines while their status as wives, sweethearts, mothers confirm them "as being properly feminine (men have wanted them)".³ Ball's point that the stigma attached to "women's issues" and "women's stories" in popular culture results in such dramas being perceived as having little cultural value, has interesting parallels with the status of women's history and, by extension, women's history on television⁴. The discrepancy is particularly acute in the context of war stories. Televisual representations of women's wartime experience such as *Land Girls* and *The Bletchley Circle* are differentiated from "proper" war stories represented in male centred dramas such as *Band of*

² C. Brunsdon "Men's Genres for Women" in, *Boxed in: Women and Television*, edited by H. Baehr and G. Dyer (London: Pandora Press 1987) p. 187.

³ Brunsdon "Men's Genres" p187

⁴ V. Ball, "Forgotten Sisters: The British Female Ensemble Drama" *Screen* 54:2 Summer 2013, p. 245, accessed January 12, 2015 doi: 10.1093/screen/hjt014

Brothers (HBO 2001) or *Dad's Army* (BBC 1968) in which female characters are often incidental and firmly positioned as secondary to the main narrative.

In terms of war films, women have fared similarly. Although, as Penny Summerfield notes, women in British films made during the Second World War itself “were neither insignificant nor lacking in competence, maturity, and independence”, in films made since the 1950s female representation has been somewhat limited.⁵ In the immediate post-war climate, priority in films was given to male experiences of the Second World War, with women taking central roles in just four of the fifty most watched war films of the 1950s and 1960s.⁶ Although this number has certainly increased, with female characters taking prominent roles in big budget war films such as, *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007), *Charlotte Grey* (Gillian Armstrong, 2001) and *Suit Français* (Saul Dibb, 2015), romantic melodrama remains the dominant medium through which feminine war stories are told in cinemas.⁷

The televisual exception to this, perhaps, is *Tenko* (BBC 1981), which, as Ball highlights, foregrounds not only ‘marginalised aspects of women’s history in terms of war’ but also marginalised identities, i.e. lesbians⁸. The setting of *Tenko* within a female prisoner of war camp is conducive to more recognisable wartime narratives. This removes it from the domestic and elevates it beyond the dichotomy of the masculine front line and the feminine home front.

In a similar manner to *Tenko*, both *Land Girls* and *The Bletchley Circle* situate women in a traditionally male genre and, in placing them centre stage and granting them narrative agency, place them in typically male roles.⁹ This challenging of gender stereotypes could problematise both texts’

⁵ P. Summerfield, “Public Memory or Public Amnesia? British Women of the Second World War in Popular Films of the 1950s and 1960s” *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 48:4 October 2009 p936, accessed January 27 2015 doi: 10.1086/603598

⁶ Summerfield “Public Memory” p.938

⁷ M. Landy “Melodrama and Femininity in World War II British Cinema” in *The British Cinema Book*, edited by R. Murphy (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) p232

⁸ Ball, “Forgotten Sisters”, p. 246

⁹ Discussion of women in men’s genres in C. Brunsdon, “Men’s Genres”, p.184 - 203

creation of textual realism. However, as well as the historical fact of women taking up such roles, Charlotte Brunsdon notes that “the realism of a television programme is constructed through a range of devices and conventions which derive their significance primarily from generic and textual histories, rather than from any direct relation to the real.”¹⁰ Thus the sense of reality, and therefore their success in telling these stories, comes not entirely, or even in the majority, from their basis in historical fact, but rather in their successful utilisation of narrative devices from their respective genres to create recognition and familiarity. While deviations from historical accuracy, such as the absence of the blackout in *Land Girls* and the fact that few women actually worked as cryptanalysts at Bletchley Park (most performed administrative roles), could be seen as problematic in texts ostensibly concerned with the telling of history, there is undeniably validity in the power of such generic devices to “breathe life into the past ... and [imbue] ... sometimes stale facts with individual power and relevance to a contemporary audience.”¹¹ In the case of *Land Girls*, this generic affiliation is primarily with women’s drama hence its foregrounding of love, relationships and family issues, whereas *The Bletchley Circle* functions also as a crime thriller, arguably giving it more narrative scope in terms of realism and acceptability. Therefore, despite questions about the authority of television history, the familiarity of generic devices used in both *Land Girls* and *The Bletchley Circle* grant them scope to tell unfamiliar and sometimes transgressive stories.

It is also interesting to consider both series in relation to the recent trend of using television as a nostalgic space, a repository of culture in danger of being forgotten. From accusations of cultural amnesia and erasure there seems to be a subtle shift towards the construction of television as both an object of nostalgia, threatened as it is by digital platforms and online streaming services,

¹⁰ C. Brunsdon, “Men’s Genres”, p. 187

¹¹ G. Creeber, *Serial Television; Big Drama on the Small Screen* (United Kingdom: BFI Publishing 2005), p. 27

and a source of nostalgia and collective remembering.¹² As well as *Land Girls* and *The Bletchley Circle*, further examples of this shift can be seen in the expansion of remembrance themed programming on the BBC around Remembrance Sunday and the proliferation of television shows whose primary function is to represent and commemorate specific events, such as the BBC's 2011 drama *United* (BBC Two on Sunday 24 April 2011), which dramatised the events around the Munich Air Disaster. Interestingly, in terms of previous discussion of accuracy and realism in historical television dramas, *United* was praised by critics for its depiction of 1950s Old Trafford and its evocation of football culture at the time.¹³ However the drama was harshly criticised by relatives of some of the people portrayed, for misrepresenting their characters and omitting altogether some of those who had died in the crash.¹⁴ Thus the series can be seen to have achieved realism in its aesthetic recreation of the past, but perhaps be lacking in its characterisation of the people involved. Whilst this can be seen as problematic, as people were actively offended by perceived inaccuracies, as with *Land girls* and *The Bletchley Circle*, it does not necessarily affect the success of *United* as a historical television drama.

Both *The Bletchley Circle* and *Land Girls* can be read as nostalgic, offering spaces in which marginalized and largely untold histories can be explored and preserved. *Land Girls* was created by Roland Moore and commissioned by the BBC in 2007 explicitly to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War. As the first period drama commissioned by BBC daytime, controller Liam Keelan hoped the series would “pay tribute, not only to the many lives that were lost in the Second World War, but also to the land girls who played such an

¹² For further discussion of this see A. Holdsworth *Television Memory and Nostalgia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and A. Huyssen *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹³ J. White “Jimmy Murphy’s central part in the resurrection of Manchester United as the key reason to watch *United*” *Daily Telegraph* (April 22nd 2011) URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/manchester-united/8467086/Jim-White-Jimmy-Murphys-central-part-in-the-resurrection-of-Manchester-United-is-the-key-reason-to-watch-United.html> accessed May 5, 2015.

¹⁴ “Sir Matt Busby’s son ‘disgusted’ at *United* TV film” *BBC News Online Manchester*, (April 24th 2011) URL <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-13181651>, accessed May 5th 2015

important role on the home front.”¹⁵ The first series, broadcast at 17:15 on consecutive days, beginning on Monday 7th September 2009, was situated as a part of a “unique week of programming” designed to celebrate “everyday heroes on the Home Front.”¹⁶ It was billed alongside *The Week We Went To War* (BBC1 7 -14th September 2009) presented by Katherine Jenkins and Michael Aspel, who discussed his own experience of being evacuated, and focused on everyday experiences of ordinary people living on the Home Front during the Second World War, placing *Land Girls* in a context of previously untold stories outside of dominant historical narratives. Series creator Roland Moore wanted the series to shine an “overdue spotlight on the land girls” but also to explore some less well known realities of life on the Home Front, such as the use of prisoners of war as agricultural labourers and the treatment of Italian nationals.¹⁷

The Bletchley Circle, written by Guy Burt and broadcast on ITV, beginning in September 2012, did not have the same explicit purpose of commemoration, but rather an implicit sense that it was telling previously untold histories. It also provided an innovative take on traditional crime drama. In foregrounding four female characters the series allowed them to appropriate and control the interrogative gaze and discursive authority.¹⁸ Anna Maxwell Martin, who plays Susan in the series, attributed this as part of the show’s unique appeal; “People enjoyed seeing four intelligent women on TV.”¹⁹

¹⁵ L Keelan, BBC Press Packs, *Land Girls Introduction*, accessed March 13, 2015.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2009/08_august/18/land_girls.shtml

¹⁶ BBC Press Packs, *Land Girls Introduction*, accessed March 13, 2015.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2009/08_august/18/land_girls.shtml

¹⁷ R Moore, BBC Press Packs, *Land Girls Introduction*, accessed March 13, 2015.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2009/08_august/18/land_girls.shtml

¹⁸ S. Thornham and T. Purvis, *Television Drama: Theories and Identities* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 122

¹⁹ A. Maxwell Martin, ITV Press Pack *The Bletchley Circle Series 2*, accessed March 13, 2015.
<http://www.itv.com/presscentre/press-packs/bletchley-circle-s2>

Television's association with marketable nostalgia and the domestic makes it a safe and regulated space in which history can be told. Television shows' familiar structure and repeating patterns create a controlled space in which marginalised histories, narratives and identities can be represented, but also controlled and defined within specific contextual limits. In both *Land Girls* and *The Bletchley Circle* the familiar pattern and seriality of television drama renders the unstable constructions of femininity (unstable in so far as the female characters transgress gender norms and occupy traditionally male narrative spaces) on display in both texts safe in its repetitious and closed nature. Transgressive or problematic storylines, such as unwanted pregnancy, adultery, domestic abuse, rape and sexually motivated murder, are neutralised by the need for closure and resolution at the end of each series.

Both *Land Girls* and *The Bletchley Circle* function as narratively complex dramas, with individual stories interweaving with over-arching group narratives.²⁰ This allows, within the closed series structure of both dramas, for continuous resolution and perpetuation of storylines and character arcs. This pattern, familiar to any regular viewer of television drama, allows narratives of social change to be played out in a safe and formulaic way. In this way, storylines which would perhaps be alien to a modern viewer, such as Susan's struggle to reconcile her past identity as a code breaker, vital to the war effort, with her postwar identity as an "ordinary" housewife, in a society struggling to reconcile the wartime need for female labour, with the post war desire to reassert male competency, becomes familiar as the struggle for a woman to reconcile her career and family life, visible in soap opera and many TV dramas.²¹ The end result is that both series present their audiences with a safe version of female empowerment and emancipation, framed within a post-feminist media discourse. The Second World War, a period of instability and social upheaval,

²⁰ T. Dunleavy, *Television Drama: Form, Agency, Innovation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 149.

²¹ C. Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the 'New Look' (Communication and Society)* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 195.

is presented through familiar characters and dramatic structures that reassure the viewer that the outcomes are known and will present no radical challenge to their conceptions of gendered identity. Thus while female ensemble dramas offer a somewhat experimental space, their familiarity downplays any real challenge to hegemonic narratives.

In the first episode of *The Bletchley Circle*, Susan expresses her doubt over her role in post war society by asking Millie, “When this is over, won’t we have to be ordinary?”.²² Susan’s participation in war work and her place in this new society of women - the huts at Bletchley are depicted as a female dominated space, while men are acknowledged as being ‘up at the house’ they are not visible - has elevated her beyond the status of “ordinary woman” and allowed her to fulfil a higher purpose.²³ As previously discussed, in terms of historical accuracy, this depiction of the huts could be seen as problematic, however in terms of the narrative it is key, as the absence of men renders Susan, and the other women, as viable heroines. Furthermore, Susan’s war record allows her to enter into the male dominated public sphere to present her ideas on the murders and have her theories accepted as credible by the police.²⁴ Susan’s desire to cling on to her wartime identity stands her in direct contrast to her husband, Timothy, a former soldier who has had his “fair share of excitement for one lifetime.”²⁵ Thus the usual gender roles are reversed with Timothy representing the domestic ideal upon which Susan is turning her back. Similarly, *Land Girls*’ Annie has achieved liberation from her status as both victim of domestic abuse and unhappy wife through her service in the Women’s Land Army. The WLA presents her with an alternative space in which she can be free of her father without relying on her husband.

²² *The Bletchley Circle*, Episode 1, *Cracking a Killer’s Code Part 1*, ITV, 6 September 2012

²³ *The Bletchley Circle*, Episode 1, *Cracking a Killer’s Code Part 1*, ITV, 6 September 2012

²⁴ *The Bletchley Circle*, Episode 1, *Cracking a Killer’s Code Part 1*, ITV, 6 September 2012

²⁵ *The Bletchley Circle*, Episode 1, *Cracking a Killer’s Code Part 1*, ITV, 6 September 2012

Both women make a conscious choice to remove themselves from the safe, feminine domestic sphere and place themselves in a new context defined by the women around them. Annie's sense of freedom within this new community of women, is made absolute when news reaches her that her husband is missing presumed dead.²⁶ Within the safety of the group Annie is able to confess her guilt over feelings of relief, and the new, liberated Annie is ultimately able to break out of the role of unhappy wife/grieving widow and find love with another man.²⁷

Bea in the BBC series seeks to shed her innocence and achieve sexual liberation, she wants to grow up and experience the world her sister Annie has been attempting to protect her from. Through the WLA she becomes aware of and engages with social issues, such as segregation in the US army, from which she would otherwise have been sheltered.²⁸ She also, through encountering Italian POWs labouring on the farm, imagines the possibility of travelling, seeing the world and moving beyond the role prescribed for her by society.²⁹

However, this transcendence, for all of the women, is limited and once achieved and acknowledged by patriarchal figures such as husbands, farmers, authority figures, it is willingly relinquished. The matriarchal communities they find themselves in as a result of the war, i.e. the Women's Land Army and the female dominated space depicted within the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park, create a space within which the women can find liberation and self-discovery. Once removed from these communities, they fall back into their various dysfunctional tropes. For instance, Millie's natural charisma and talent for languages allow her to be useful and vital in her work for the British Government, outside of it she is reduced to an ageing

²⁶ *Land Girls* Series 1 Episode 2 *Secrets* BBC1 8th September 2009

²⁷ *Land Girls* Series 1 Episode 5 *Destinies* BBC1 11th September 2009

²⁸ *Land Girls* Series 1 Episode 1 *Childhood's End* BBC1 7th September 2009

²⁹ *Land Girls* Series 2 Episode 2 *Displaced Loyalties* 18th January 2011

socialite, working at first as a translator for the German enemy she once fought against and later as a black market fence.³⁰

Having also removed themselves from the physical safety of the traditional, domestic, feminine sphere, the women in both series face considerable physical and emotional danger. The experience of war has removed them from the safe parameters of normal society and they must now define themselves in relation to each other and find safety within their new community.

Whilst Bea's (*Land Girls*) physical safety is never placed in jeopardy, her desire for sexual liberation makes her vulnerable to emotional dangers. In seeking out GI Cal at a village dance, she removes herself from the protective gaze of her older sister and separates herself from the rest of the Land Girls. After sleeping with Cal, Bea becomes pregnant, jeopardising her place in the WLA and opening her up to shame, disgrace and the possibility of being sent back to her abusive father.³¹ Esther (*Land Girls*) refuses to confide in the rest of the girls about her inability to pay for an operation for her son and is reduced to selling her body and opening herself up to shame and ridicule.³² Susan is exposed to physical danger when she confronts a serial killer, whom she has tracked down with the help of the other women, and to emotional damage when she witnesses the realities of death and violence that must be confronted in the traditionally male space of war.³³ Moreover, Susan faces the danger of failing as a wife and mother. At several points in the series she is forced to consider the consequences of her actions, such as tracking down and confronting a murderer alone, and the real possibility that her children will be left without a mother.³⁴ This is symptomatic of the traditional division of wartime labour, as hundreds of thousands of men faced

³⁰ *The Bletchley Circle* Series 2 Episode 3 *Unaccustomed Goods* ITV1 27th April 2014

³¹ *Land Girls* Series 1 Episode 2 *Secrets* BBC1 8th September 2009

³² *Land Girls* Series 2 Episode 3 *Final Reckoning* BBC1 19th January 2009

³³ *The Bletchley Circle* Series 1 Episode 3 *Cracking a Killer's Code Part 3* ITV1 20th September 2012

³⁴ *The Bletchley Circle* Series 1 Episode 3 *Cracking a Killer's Code Part 3* ITV1 20th September 2012

the possibility of leaving their children without a father and yet their duty to fight was privileged as a higher calling.

Transcendence of traditional gender roles and societal position is fraught with danger for all of the women and, like the wartime reality, understood to be a temporary state, limited to a finite period of time. Although the two series are set in different time periods, *Land Girls* taking place during the Second World War and *The Bletchley Circle* beginning some seven years after its end, both place their narratives of social liberation within a context of exceptional circumstances.

Familiarity in terms of characters, narrative structure and historical content is key to the success of both series as television dramas and serves to make the past relevant and recognizable to the present.³⁵ Familiarity is reinforced in both dramas by their deployment of a cross section of recognisable female tropes, a common characteristic of female ensemble dramas, which appeal to the broadest possible female fan base. Thus as broad a section of the target audience as possible will find a character with which they can directly relate or which they recognise. It is by coming together as an alternate community removed from men that these arrays of women are able to transcend these fixed identities and escape the limits of the patriarchal structure within which they operate. Familiarity is also achieved through the type of history being told. Both series use familiar imagery to imply that what they are imparting are new aspects to a known story. In this way the series “invite the viewer into the text ‘as knowledgeable citizen’”, and foreshadow the ultimate re-positioning of the female characters back into traditional gender roles and maintenance of the status quo.³⁶ The use of recognisable archival footage and historical imagery create, in both series, a

³⁵ For further discussion of this idea see G. Creeber *Serial Television: Big Drama on the Small Screen* (London: BFI Publishing, 2005) and C. McArthur *Television and History* (London: BFI, 1978).

³⁶ S. Cunningham quoted in J. Tulloch *Television Drama: Agency, Audience and Myth* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 92

“naturalistic recognition effect” which helps to situate the drama in the past and bolster realism.³⁷ In the same way that the series draw on familiar generic devices, the use of recognisable war time news footage (a prominent feature of the visual culture of the Second World War) adds authenticity to both series and contributes to the wartime aesthetic, giving them greater authority to tell their stories.

In foregrounding human drama and relationships both series seek to make female social experience of the Second World War immediate and personable to their target audiences. The Female Ensemble Drama format and women’s issue themes lend emotional realism to situations that would otherwise seem historically/temporally distant and un-relatable. In the industrial context of prime time drama, *Land Girls* and *The Bletchley Circle* do not primarily seek to document history, but rather to dramatise it, providing enough cultural capital and recognisable history to appeal to those who want to consume the series as an educational vehicle, without alienating others who simply wish to enjoy the story and broad nostalgia.³⁸ In this way neither series could be described as radical, or even particularly challenging in their retelling of history, and nor could they be if they are to function as viable, prime time family drama. While they go some way towards foregrounding marginalised narratives, both frame their stories within dominant, white, heteronormative structures, with the eventual upholding of the status quo largely predetermined by the historical subject matter and the narrative form. In the similarities of the array of characters, narratives and plot lines *The Bletchley Circle* and *Land Girls* create a sense of sameness which is consistent with other female ensemble dramas, soap operas and women’s television in general and serves to de-historicise them as women’s issues. Thus historical distance is eliminated and the quest for love, romance, marriage, a family and the home are eternalised as the things with which women always have and will be primarily concerned with.

³⁷ Tulloch *Television Drama*, p. 93

³⁸ G. Creeber, *Serial Television*, p. 20.

This follows the move in the 1980s towards a post-feminist, new traditional, ideology in women's television. Vicky Ball and Elspeth Probyn both emphasise the connection between images of the home and discourses of post feminism and re-traditionalisation.³⁹ The proliferation of a "post-feminist vision of the home to which women have 'freely' chosen to return" re-asserts maternal and domestic imperatives for women and re-locates the home as a woman's natural place.⁴⁰ New traditionalism marked the gender-political landscape of the late 80s and saw "the categories of 'mothers', 'kids', 'love' ... presented as immutable truths", the rejection of which marked a woman as deviant and other. Probyn argues that, while Post-Feminism does not challenge this ideal of the home as the natural source of a fulfilment for women, it does at least offer women the option of seeking fulfilment in careers, however always with the option of returning home.⁴¹ The home is privileged as a space of return and safety guaranteeing fulfilment rather than requiring women to fight for it.

The image of the home is particularly important to both *Land Girls* and *The Bletchley Circle*, because of its connotations as reward, safe place, as point of return once the danger and upheaval of war have passed and ultimately, the thing for which one is fighting. In both series the home functions as a neutralising/naturalising space to which women can return in order to reclaim pre-war identities, or, alternatively, to contrast and confirm newly realised identities against pre-war conceptions of themselves. Thus the home is conversely presented as the place from which women have been liberated and the space to which they freely choose to return once their war work has been completed and their liberation acknowledged. For Susan in *The Bletchley Circle* her home is both her sanctuary and her prison. Encapsulating her identity as a wife and mother as the place

³⁹ V. Ball "The "Feminization" of British Television and the Re-Traditionalization of Gender" *Feminist Media Studies* 12:2, 248-264, accessed January 12, 2015 doi: 10.1080/14680777.2011.597104 and E. Probyn, 'New Traditionalism and Post -Feminism: TV Does the Home' in *Feminist Television Criticism A Reader*, C. Brunsdon, J. D'Acci, L. Spigel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 128.

⁴⁰ Probyn, 'New Traditionalism', p. 128.

⁴¹ Probyn, *New Traditionalism*, p. 131.

where she can be with her husband and children, it also contains the hidden parts of herself in the newspaper clippings she keeps behind her mirror. It is the place she longs to escape, but also where she retreats after her ordeal at the hands of the killer and where she rediscovers herself as a wife and mother. For Bea and Annie (*Land Girls*), home is the place they seek to escape as a result of an abusive and violent father. The space of the WLA at Pasture Farm offers them a space of liberation, but it is a temporary one, to be occupied until both women can find a new home in which to reclaim the identities of wife and mother. Joyce's (*Land Girls*) home, destroyed by German bombs, can no longer anchor her identity, therefore her sense of self hangs on her husband John. Her point of reference is her identity as his wife and the prospect of the home they will make together in the future. Thus while the concept of home in both series is de-stabilised by the experience and dislocation of war, it is constructed instead as the goal or reward for properly conducted femininity to an even greater extent within the two works. .

In this dislocation and de-stabilising of the home and the foregrounding of women as heroes which is fundamental to the female ensemble drama, women are required to occupy the non-traditional narrative space of 'those who do, rather than those who are done to.'⁴² This inevitably raises questions regarding the "femininity and competence contradiction" which Brunsdon describes as "mutually exclusive terms outside certain limited spheres."⁴³ By showing women working the land or women solving crimes using mathematical techniques and deductive logic, all traditionally male traits and occupations, both series are required to reassert the femininity of the characters through narrative devices and the reliance on recognisable feminine tropes and characteristics. Whilst carrying out their transgressive identities, all of the women are also required to carry out traditional performances of femininity. Preparations to attend a local dance, tableaux of domesticity such as cooking and knitting, singing, a love of fashion are all examples of such

⁴² Brunsdon, "Men's Genres" 188

⁴³ Brunsdon, "Men's Genres" 189

devices within the two texts. Thus an unstable time for gender roles is rendered stable in another way by its translation through stable gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, consistent with the requirements of serial prime time drama, both series provide resolution and an ultimate re-location back into more traditional feminine roles for their female leads. In taking on the role of investigator in *The Bletchley Circle*, Susan's appropriation of agency and "occupation of public space" exposes her to danger, but also alienates her from her husband. She is ultimately forced to violate the Official Secrets Act, the tangible bond of secrecy that tied her to the other women, and reveal her wartime identity to her husband. In his acknowledgement of her past, Susan is able to reconcile herself to her postwar identity and fully assume the role of wife and mother. Bea's (*Land Girls*) marriage to farm hand Billy saves her from being sent home and the shame of living as an unwed mother.⁴⁴ However, her time as a liberated woman is cut short as she becomes a wife and a mother. Joyce's (*Land Girls*) constancy is rewarded when her husband is returned to her and she is allowed to reclaim the identity of wife.⁴⁵

Charlotte Brunsdon, in her 1987 analysis of *Widows*, a seminal female ensemble drama featuring a group of women whose husbands are killed during an armed robbery and who then decide to team up and carry out the crime themselves, noted a similar process of relocation, with the culmination of the second series seeing "come-uppances ... 'get' the women, and push them back to much more traditional feminine narrative roles."⁴⁶ *Widows*, *Land Girls* and *The Bletchley Circle* are all limited by the requirements of prime time television drama, dwindling conceivable storylines once the initial premise has been exhausted and the need to provide a resolution that would sit well with the show's audience.⁴⁷ Brunsdon concluded that "in order to conclude this rather unfamiliar

⁴⁴ *Land Girls* Series 1 Episode 5 *Destinies* BBC1 11th September 2009

⁴⁵ *Land Girls* Series 3 Episode 5 *Last Days of Summer* BBC1 11th November 2011

⁴⁶ Brunsdon, "Men's Genres" 190

⁴⁷ Discussed in Brunsdon "Men's Genres"

story, the unfamiliar element -women as heroes - must be transformed.’’⁴⁸In the same way as Lynda La Plante’s *Widows*, the *Land Girls* and women of *The Bletchley Circle* can only find resolution when they have been transformed, when they have completed the work which removed them from their normal place in society and returned, willingly, to their traditional roles. Their achievements are acknowledged and celebrated, both within the texts and by their audiences but their transcendence was only ever to be temporary. As well as the limitations of generic structure, *Land Girls* and *The Bletchley Circle* are limited by their historical subject matter, which dictates a limited scope of narrative resolutions.

This is not to downplay the potential of female ensemble drama in representing marginalised aspects of women’s history such as women’s social experience of the Second World War. Clearly the location of female ensemble dramas outside of mainstream television narratives and consumption, even within the context of television as a feminised medium, affords them greater freedom in terms of representation of women. However, these representations must be translated through recognisable tropes and often stock characters. Whatever its limitations, female ensemble drama clearly offers a beneficial and exciting space in which untold stories and marginalised identities can be explored.

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⁴⁸ Brunsdon, “Men’s Genres” 198

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